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ABSTRACT

In composition studies, the most influential statement of what Brian Street calls the autonomous model of literacy is the work of Walter Ong. Ong bases the foundation of this model on the research on cognitive development done by Alexander Luria, a student of Lev Vygotsky. Ong finds in this research, carried out among the Islamic people of Uzbekistan in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, empirical evidence for his contention that literacy actually causes fundamental changes in human cognition. The weakness of this interpretation is that it fails to consider the context. Ong's reading ignores not only the ethnocentrism and the propaganda value of Luria's research but also the political ideology incorporated into the experiment. In addition, Ong's autonomous reading allows him to dismiss as "elaborate Marxist scaffolding" the theory underlying Luria's project. This theory of the relationship of language, society, and individual thought leads to a richer explanation of the Uzbeki data than either Ong's neutral autonomous reading or Luria's rudimentary Marxist interpretation. This alternative explanation has implications for our own literacy instruction, for it is consistent with David Bartholomae's findings about the written language of freshmen attempting to move into the academic discourse community. (Twelve references are appended.) (MS)

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Re-Reading Ong: Literacy and Social Change

In composition studies the most influential statement of what Street calls the autonomous model of literacy is the work of Walter Ong. For support for this perspective, Ong's recent Orality and Literacy (1982) draws heavily on Luria's (1976) account of research carried out during the 1930's in Uzbekistan in the Soviet Union. This presentation argues against the automonous view of literacy by discussing the weaknesses of Ong's interpretation of Luria's data.

While Ong finds in Luria's research report empirical evidence for his contention that literacy actually causes fundamental changes in human cognition, his reading ignores not only the ethnocentrism and the propaganda value of Luria's research but also the political ideology incorporated into the experiment. Most important, Ong's autonomous reading allows him to dismiss as "elaborate Marxist scaffolding " (OL 50) the theory underlying Luria's project. This theory of the relationship of language, society, and individual thought (Vygotsky 1962, 1978) leads, in fact, to a richer explanation of the Uzbeki data than either Ong's neutral autonomous reading or Luria's crude Marxist interpretation. Indeed this alternative explanation has implications for our literacy instruction, for it is amazingly consistent with Bartholomae's (1985) findings about the written language of freshmen attempting to move into the academic discourse community.

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Re-Reading Ong: Literacy and Social Change

In composition studies, the most influential statement of what Street calls the autonomous model of literacy is the work of Walter Ong. Like other advocates of this perspective, Ong sees literacy primarily as technology that "fosters" cognitive development. For Ong, writing is "an absolute necessity" for analytical, sequential, abstract thought ("L & O" 2).

In chapter 3 of Orality and Literacy (1982), Ong explains how oral thought and language differ from literate thought and language. Among other characteristics, he lists "additive rather than subordinate" (37); "aggregative rather than analytic" (38); "empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced" (45); and "situational rather than abstract" (49). In the eight pages which Ong devotes to showing that oral cognition is situational and not abstract, he draws almost exclusively on Alexander Luria's Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations. Published in the United States in 1976, Luria's book reports on research carried out among the Islamic people of Uzbekistan in the Soviet Union during the literacy campaign of the early 1930's. A student of Lev Vygotsky, Luria designed this project in order to study the cognitive effects of the social and cultural change brought about by collectivization.

Reading from the autonomous model Street describes, then, Ong finds in Luria's research empirical evidence for his contention that literacy actually causes fundamental changes in human cognition.

Reading from an ideological perspective--that is, assuming that literacy is always permeated with its social and political context--I contend that Ong's reading makes Luria's research less useful than it might be in exploring the nature of literacy, precisely because of its failure to consider the context. What I wish to discuss today is first the context of the Uzbeki experiment and then the ideology incorporated into it and the theory underlying it.

This context is perhaps most succinctly summed up by Ben Eklof's term--"Stalinist literacy" (138). Well before the 1917 Revolution, illiteracy had been identified with the exploitation of the people by the Tsarist government, and as in Cuba and more recently in Nicaragua, one of the first goals of the revolution was to bring literacy to the masses. But civil and ecomomic upheaval in the 20's delayed systematic implementation. According to Eklof, the literacy campaigns were incorporated, in the 30's, into Stalin's economic plans and were clearly and strongly linked to the massive industrialization and forced collectivization going on at the same time (138 ff). Another function of these literacy campaigns was the russification of indigenous peoples under Soviet rule. Perception of this goal stirred resistance--in the western provinces so much that literacy workers were often attacked, sometimes even killed (140).

Though his book makes no mention of Stalin's methods and aims, Luria's major message is nonetheless consistent with revolutionary Marxist ideology. Cognitive Development is replete with conclusions that those who have been collectivized perform better on developmental tasks than independent farmers. The collective

activists, in fact, do better than independent farmers even when the collective activists are identified by Luria as illiterate.

But Ong's reading does not discuss the possibility that these conditions may have skewed the research design or its conclusions. Ong attempts to deal with both the ethnocentrism and the propaganda value of Luria's work in one sentence and one phrase. The sentence: "In an elaborate framework of Marxist theory, Luria attends to some degree to matters other than the immediate consequences of literacy, such as 'the unregulated individualistic economy centered on agriculture' and 'the beginnings of collectivization' (1975, p. 14)" (50). Isolating literacy from its context, Ong misses the ideology embedded in Luria's experiments. Most important, with the phrase "elaborate Marxist scaffolding" (JL 50), Ong dismisses Vygotsky's theory of the relationship of language, society, and individual thought.

Ong uses Luria's research to make five points about the differences between "situational" oral cognition and "abstract" literate cognition. I'll mention only the three I discuss today. First, literates accepted the premises of syllogism-type questions; illiterate subjects, on the other hand, rejected the premises and therefore gave answers that, as Ong explains, "would not fit...into pure logical forms" (52). Second, literates classified drawings of familiar objects using abstract principles ("they are all tools"), while illiterates categorized according to the function of the objects in practical situations ("use the hatchet and the saw on the log"). Third, unlike literates, illiterates showed "difficulty in articulate self-analysis" (54).

When presented with syllogism problems like "In the Far North, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zemlya is in the Far North and there is always snow there. What color are the bears there?" or "Cotton can grow only where it is hot and dry. In England it is cold and damp. Can cotton grow there?" (Luria 100-116), some Uzbek peasants refused to accept the experimenters' premises as facts, and responded with "I don't know what color the bears there are, I never saw them" (111) or "We speak only of what we see; we don't talk about what we haven't seen" (109). Luria concludes that these people cannot use syllogistic thinking. Ong is more tolerant of such responses, explaining that to the oral mind such questions seem either patently silly or completely uninteresting (52). Neither Ong nor Luria seems to consider the possibility that such responses could be examples of elaborate communal leg-pulling aimed at the city-slicker academics from Moscow.

Similarly, neither Ong nor Luria considers that such responses could index healthy skepticism or veiled resistance. Luria tells us that the "experimental sessions began with long conversations (sometimes repeated) with the subjects in the relaxed atmosphere of a tea house--where the villagers spent most of their free time--or in camps in the fields and mountain pastures around the evening campfire" (16). But how do we know that the villagers and farmers were indeed "relaxed"? Would you be relaxed if centuries of traditions were interrupted by a violent revolution in Washington and New York, the assassination of the heads of government, a new regime promising a better life but replacing familiar ways with very

different ways of speaking and acting, all of this carrried out with threats, explicit or implicit, of death or deportation if compliance were not forthcoming? Luria seems to assume a trust between his experimenters and his subjects that I have little reason to share. Perhaps the rapport was in fact present, but Luria's book, rather than documenting it, only claims it. Ong's reading questions neither Luria's research methods nor the Uzbekis' forthrightness.

Sometimes, in answer to the syllogism questions, Luria's peasants gave answers like "From your words, I would have to say that cotton shouldn't grow there. But I would have to know what spring is like there, what kind of nights they have" (111) or "To go by your words, [the bears] should all be white" (114). Luria continues to see such responses as evidence of faulty thinking, labeling them with comments such as "reference to lack of personal experience" and "refusal to draw conclusions" (111). Ong, at this point, posits another explanation: "'To go by your words,'" he says "appears to indicate awareness of the formal intellectual structures. A little literacy goes a long way" (53). Well, perhaps.

The peasant who gave this last "To go by your words" response is, according to Luria, "barely literate" (114). But interestingly, Luria tells us that, when presented with the white bears syllogism, another peasant, "Ishnakul, age sixty-three, collective farmworker, illiterate, one of the most respected people in the village," replied, "If you say they are white from the cold, they should be white there too" (114). This response merits no discussion from Ong, even though both answers are reported on the same page in

Cognitive Development. Ong credits only one answer as indicating movement toward abstract thought, the one from the literate speaker, while Luria classifies the two answers together because both speakers were active in the collective. If literacy per se were making the cognitive changes in these peasants, wouldn't responses so similar come from persons with the same amount of literacy? Perhaps these phrases--"From your words," "To go by your words" and "If you say they are"--indicate that the peasants feel they must respond to the questions asked by the strangers from Moscow but that they do not want to be held responsibile for the truth value.

Just as his belief in autonomous literacy causes Ong to gloss over the inconsistencies between his own thesis and Luria's report, so too it causes him to concentrate on "formal logical structures" rather than on the semantic content of Luria's questions and the peasants' responses. For example, the third chapter of Cognitive Development on "Generalization and Abstraction" reports the results of tests in which subjects were asked to select the object in a series of pictures not belonging with the others, or to select from a series one object belonging with two or three others from another series. Many of the reported questions focused on farming-related items--ears of grain, buckets, wheels, logs--meaningful objects in a society trying to glorify the worker and trying to convince people to farm collectively. Interestingly, another large group had to do with tools--axes, saws, knives, hatchets, and hammers, and sickles. Reading for form not content, Ong misses the fact that the very language of the research project encodes the ideology of the revolution.

There exists another important reason why ignoring the semantic content of Luria's questions as Ong does presents a distorted reading of the Uzbeki research. Tools are, in fact, a significant part of the theoretical framework of Luria's empirical study. It is important, I think, to remember that Luria's project grew out of Vygotsky's theory of language, which, in turn, grew out of Engels' theory of tools.

According to Engels, labor and tools are the means by which human beings change nature and, in doing so, transform themselves (C & S 7). What Vygotsky did was to extend Engels' concept of tool use to include signs (7). Reacting against the deterministic behaviorist theories of early psychology, Vygotsky set out to show that "the individual modifies the stimulus situation as a part of the process of responding to it" (14). Thus, in Vygotsky's theory, both tool and sign have a "mediating function" (54). The tool transforms the outside environment; the sign transforms first other persons, then the individual herself.

Vygotsky believed that all "higher functions"--by which he meant voluntary attention, logical memory, formation of concepts--"originate as actual relations between human individuals" (57). The social "interpersonal process" is then transformed into an individual "intrapersonal" one (57). According to Vygotsky, both speech and writing are not only tools and signs but also products of this on-going transformation of individuals by their social environment and of social relations by individuals.

It seems almost predictable then that Luria's project would have to do with tools, symbols of the revolution and emblems of the

theory of language out of which he is working. Of course I don't believe that Luria's researchers purposely framed the test questions to carry the ideology so explicitly; more likely the questions were consciously constructed around objects familiar to their rural subjects. Yet the semantic content of the questions is consistent with the dominant ideology. Ong's reading fails to consider the possibility that this "elaborate Marxist scaffolding" goes beyond the Soviet movement in the Thirties to collectivize, that indeed the theory offers an explanation for Luria's results.

Synthesizing the theoretical works of Vygotsky and Bakhtin, Caryl Emerson explains that both see the Word as socially acquired. Bakhtin believes that at first the words of others are "authoritative"; later they become "internally persuasive," that is "one's own" (255). This is similar to Vygotsky's argument that words are first used instrumentally, as tools which change the external environment, before they are used internally, as signs which transform the self. This process, I suggest, is precisely what is going on in the responses of the Uzbeki peasants. Some of them are using, or attempting to use, the words of others, words which carry authority, before these words are have become "internally persuasive," before these words, these ways of speaking, carry much internal meaning.

The peasants whom Luria credits--and Ong accepts--as having achieved "independent thought" appear to me to be those who accept the revolution and its discourse. Is independent thinking, then, to be equated with acceptance of authority? The theory Luria is working out of seems to imply an affirmative answer. Since both

thought and language originate in others, especially in others regarded as authoritative, then to think or to speak differently labels one as deficient or deviant, not labels one would wish in the Soviet Union under Stalin. "Independent thought," it appears, can thus be defined as the kind of thinking that a given culture rewards by calling it independent, not a kind of thinking that exists apart from the social realm.

In the last chapter of Cognitive Development , Luria reports on the changes in self-analysis and self-awareness that result from social change. This section plays an important role in Ong's reading, for in his theory, the concept of self is a function of literacy. Luria elicted responses from his informants by asking "What sort of person are you?" "What are your shortcomings?" "Are you satisfied with yourself or would you like to be different?" (150). When illiterate peasants from outlying districts were asked such questions, they answered by saying: "I have only one dress and two robes, and those are all my shortcomings" (148); or "I was a farmhand; I have a hard time and many debts, with a measure of wheat costing eighteen rubles--that's what troubles me" (149); or "How can I talk about my character? Ask others; they can tell you about me. I myself can't say anything" (149).

Luria explains such responses with terse comments like "'Shortcomings' understood as things that are lacking" (148); "Question understood in terms of external conditions of life" (150). Again, Ong's reading is more sympathetic: "Self-evaluation modulated into group evaluation and then handled in terms of expected reactions from others"; "Judgement bears in on the

individual from the outside, not from the inside": "Another man...responded with touching and humane directness" (JL 55). But these subjects' references to desire for respect from their cultural group are seen by both Luria and Ong as evidence for a lack of self-differentiation, not as indications that perhaps these answers are attempts to preserve some traditional identity in the face of forced social change.

Those subjects who are cognitively developed enough to be able to "distinguish psychological features" (159) turn out to be collectivized according to Luria and literate according to Ong. Again, Ong misses the content of these speeches. Whether collectivized or literate, those peasants who can "distinguish psychological features" remark on either the improvements in their lives brought about by the revolution or the changes that the revolution will now make possible (155-159). To Luria's questions, they gave answers like "Before, I was a farmhand, I worked for a boss and didn't dare talk back to him; he did with me as he pleased. Now I know what my rights are" (157).

Like new converts to any religion, these peasants testify in the accepted code to a changed-for-the-better life: I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see. These speeches tell us little about independent, logical, or abstract thinking or about "literacy itself." They do tell us about the apparently universal conversion experience and a typical trope of revolutions, self-analysis and vows of self-improvement.

In my ideological reading, the Uzbekis' responses are verbal attempts to interact with a new and unfamiliar power structure. I

draw no conclusions about their sincerity. Considered along with its social and political context, Luria's research does not tell us as much about the cognitive effects of literacy as Ong believes. It does seem to illustrate, however, the idea the human beings demonstrate their affinity for specific social groups by demonstrating their facility with the language peculiar to those groups.

Like the freshmen whose papers Bartholomae analyzed in his essay "Inventing the University," Luria's peasants recognize some of the features of the language of authority and attempt to use those features, but, as outsiders, they do not necessarily use them felicitously. The kind of thinking both Ong and Luria call abstract includes accepting culturally-privileged taxonomic categories and the premises, no matter how foreign, of the syllogism. Both abstract thought and literacy emerge, then, as situational. And power is a part of the situation.

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